

Thoughts on Seeing El Sistema

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Sir Simon Rattle calls it “the most important thing happening in the world in classical music.” I had heard a lot about it. I had been a part of several events that considered ways to adapt its success to American soil. So I had to go see Venezuela’s El Sistema for myself. I had to hear not just their top orchestra, the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, which raised hairs on my neck and raised-rock music-like cheering ovations when I heard them in Los Angeles, Boston and at Carnegie Hall. I had to hear the beginners and average youth orchestras. I had to feel where the excitement grew in the poorest barrios where each “nucleo” (their word for the community music school) lives. I had to sniff out the truth of the implausible claims.

So I spent a week inside Venezuela’s El Sistema’s, exploring it in and around Caracas, visiting classes, talking to teachers, watching, asking, attending rehearsals and performances, hosted by El Sistema staff, who answered my endless questions and translated with equal patience. I can affirm Rattle’s claim and raise him one; it is the single most amazing thing I have ever seen in arts learning. I spent most of the week with my jaw dropped, with tears and visions of new possibility brimming in my eyes.

Part 1: Background

El Sistema began 33 years ago when 11 children gathered in an underground parking garage in Caracas to play music together, led by organist, engineer, politician José Antonio Abreu. Today, FESNOJIV (the Spanish acronym for the State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras), more commonly known as El Sistema, teaches 300,000 of Venezuela’s poorest children in the nationwide music learning program. Many begin attending the “nucleo” as early as age two or three, and the vast majority continue well into their teens, attending six days a week (sometimes seven days a week), three or four hours a day after school, plus retreats and intensives on vacations and in the summer. The country now has over 60 children’s orchestras, almost 200 youth orchestras, 30 professional adult orchestras, dozens of choruses. Participation is free for all students.

Thirty-three years ago, the nation of Venezuela had a total of two orchestras, and a classical music audience of about one thousand. Now they have a parade of the worldwide classical stars wanting to work with El Sistema, and major world orchestras signing up to perform in their soon-to-open new hall. Catch—an orchestra can rent the new hall only if they agree to give free lessons to El Sistema students.

The all-star orchestra is the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra, which has taken triumphant world tours, and is compared favorably with the Berlin Philharmonic and the other best orchestras in the world. The players are 15-27 years old. This is what makes El Sistema so mind-boggling—it is not only an effective nationwide social service program that turns around the lives of hundreds of thousands of at-risk kids; it also produces capital A art as well or better than anyone in the Western systemas can manage. The 27 year old

conductor Gustavo Dudamel, a product of El Sistema, is the new Music Director of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and has achieved international music star status, a long way from his barrio home and small town nucleo where he played second violin as a child.

How is this possible? How can a sports mad country have more kids learning classical instruments than playing on organized teams? How can it be the poorest kids in a desperately poor nation (let's just say the billions in oil revenues seem *not* to trickle down very far) comprise 90% of the students?—as the success grows, more affluent parents increasingly bring their children to the barrio to learn music, and El Sistema keeps a careful eye on the socio-economic balance.) How can kids from the most dangerous barrios in the world (the murder and gun violence rates in Caracas are the highest of any non-war-zone in the world) play Beethoven, Bernstein and Bartok as well as the best players in the world? How can it be that the street vendors in Caracas, a city in a country with no particular tradition of classical music before El Sistema, sell as many pirated classical CDs as hiphop and pop? The answers make it the most important thing happening in the world of classical music.

There are many factors contributing to this miracle. There is a little research has been done to ascertain some of the measures of impact and reasons for it. Inter-American Bank has done one study (<http://idbdocs.iadb.org/wsdocs/getdocument.aspx?docnum=1002635>) and the UN Development Programme has completed another. The data is good to know, but doesn't capture much insight into the success. Certainly, I was not undertaking a formal study, and had only a week's intensive. Nonetheless, here are some of the crucial success factors I spotted and some of the distinctive elements that make it so remarkable.

Funding

The program is almost entirely government funded, but not a penny comes from arts ministries, all from social welfare. There are some private and foundation funders, but they are not major supports. The program was conceived as and still works as a way to support the lives of the neediest young people. Abreu has brilliantly politicked the government funding so that it has steadily grown through six swings of government from highly conservative to very liberal over its three decades. The current Chavez government has committed to expand it to one million children in ten years, partly because government as well as previous administrations are well aware of the international prestige of having the world's awe for El Sistema, and they recognize and support the enormous contribution made to their country. The Chavez government has committed to expand to one million children, including moving its impact into the school day (currently it is almost entirely an after-school program) to dramatically increase the presence of music in all Venezuelan schools.

It is one of the most mission-driven large programs I have ever seen. At every nucleo, all the educators and staff can tell you exactly what the goals of El Sistema are—a stunningly unified vision and purpose. Even more impressively, each individual uses her or his own words, images and stories to describe these goals. This is powerful advocacy: consistent, unified vision and message, from

the national leaders to the local leaders to all the teachers to every janitor. But the message never sounds canned; it is always personal and passionate. They all have their eyes on the same prize, and they never lose sight of it.

In a typically clever move, many years ago Abreu anticipated the cost of instruments could become a major problem, especially as the program grew and the top orchestras got better and better. So in 1982, Abreu garnered UNESCO funding to bring in one renowned European luthier. He trained seven Venezuelans to make string instruments. It takes five years to get good enough as an instrument maker to teach others, and several generations of instrument makers have now trained new generations. There is a partnership with a vocational high school to bring in new talent; there are over fifty new instrument maker-teachers in the pipeline now. They all take the long view, like the cathedral builders, knowing they are rebuilding a national and international industry, with seven training/production centers planned around the country. The world's greatest instrument makers come and do residencies to teach the best techniques. The pride in these instrument makers, from ages 17 to 80 was palpable. Many are themselves graduates of El Sistema, and in one workshop, four players whipped out their just-completed and just-repaired instruments and played a few rambunctious Latin American folk tunes. They are learning how to make the best quality instruments, not how to make them fast.

Recognizing the effectiveness of El Sistema, the Chavez government has committed to triple the funding, to triple the number of students involved, in the next ten years. The leaders of FESNOJIV are clearly concerned about such rapid expansion, but you feel this fire in their guts that says they have to go for it because they could have so much impact on the lives of a million of their nation's poorest kids. They have the vision of entire culture change in their eyes: Imagine if we could instill love, safety, hard work ethic, belief in personal value, trust in group endeavor, and deep joy to a million kids lives, instead of the darker alternatives that are poised waiting to grab those vulnerable lives. One of their biggest challenges will training enough teachers to work so closely with one million children; to accomplish this they are encouraging their best students to become teachers, which is already the case with most of their teachers. This retention of talent and commitment affirms why the vision remains so sharp, and the practices so elegantly effective.

Teaching and Learning

One of the most obvious reasons for the miracle is that they have the students for so many hours a week, for so many years. They see students for three or four hours a day, six days a week, and seven sometimes. Some start at ages two or three, but this requires a lot of parental participation—they visit the homes of those prospective very young students to make sure the family can sustain the commitment. When they can start kids that young, they work on body expressiveness and rhythm, doing work that doesn't sound too different from good work done with pre-schoolers around the world. Most kids join around five or six. A number of students leave around age 12 (percentages were not available, the dropoff is not drastic, and certainly some number do drop out at other ages along the way), when they complete primary school, but even by that point the large majority had six or more years of learning, and are, both by FESNOJIV report, and my sense of them, deeply changed by the experience.

They leave with a sense of capability, with strong social skills, with endurance and resilience, owning a confidence about taking on enormous challenges, a deep sense of value and being loved and appreciated, a trust for group process and cooperation, and a feel for excellence in their own hands. Also, students who spend some years in El Sistema, complete high school at a higher percentages, and go to college in higher percentages, than their peers.

Discipline is relaxed but unbending. Attendance is reportedly not an issue—students want to be there, and certainly the sense of responsibility to the group, the section and the teacher is a part of the motivation.

Students always start with choir and keep that going right into their instrument years, and often sing and learn and play instruments in a mix, starting around age five. The singing gets them working in ensembles from day one, to build community.

One nucleo started the idea of having the four year olds create a “paper orchestra” in which they make cardboard replicas of their favorite instruments with their parents, and, with the parents “play them” along with recordings. This teaches them how to care for an instrument, how playing it feels, and it prepares them to handle their first real instrument a couple of years later. It also introduces the music they will be playing in a few years. Their first instruments are recorder and percussion, which all learn. I saw a string orchestra of five to six year olds (their sound was far more advanced), while mostly they pick their first instruments around ages six and seven, obviously, some who are ready start earlier; wind instruments have to wait for the kid’s new teeth to come in. Kids can pick and change instruments, but shifting is taken seriously and not done casually. They start with singing because it enables the kids to learn to stay in tune, work cooperatively and develop control of musical variables.

Their early orchestral instrument instruction includes singing and playing with the instrument, often playing single notes within a group song—they work with a single note for quite a while to develop a sense of quality sound. I heard a chorus and recorder-playing ensemble of 6-10 year olds (four adults in the room with 60 students), and was astonished at the quality of the artistry at such a young age. Some students follow the chorus track rather than the orchestral track, including the “white hands” orchestra of deaf students who “sing” with choreographed movements as a part of the singing chorus.

They ease their way into the use of full standard notation over years, and seem to have a feel for escalating the challenge in such a natural way that there is an easy natural learning of the language, braided in seamlessly. They have three levels of practice every week—whole ensemble work, section work (which is heavily emphasized, with the older students serving as peer-teachers to the younger ones in the sections), and private lessons, usually twice a week. The teachers told me that since the one-on-one teacher is also usually the section teacher and sometimes also the orchestra conductor, they are able to accelerate learning because students keep advancing between private lessons, catching mistakes, and guiding improvement throughout the rest of the week. As a teacher told me, “there is no time wasted in mistakes.” They don’t ingrain bad habits because the teacher is right there to guide their improvement every day.

I also noted that there is frequently more than one adult in the room working with students. In that chorus group just mentioned, there were sixty students and four adults—two chorus leaders, a piano accompanist, and a

quattro player (a traditional Venezuelan small-guitarlike instrument) who performed in some of the folk pieces (and couldn't help singing quietly along with the others from the side.) The conductors were passionate and demanding, pulling the best out of them as if they were on a major stage, and it was clear they were extending the singers/recorder players level of finesse and nuance through the performance for this group of strangers who showed up in their concrete room in the former racetrack that got mothballed by the state, and got picked up as a nucleo because of its location near a barrio.

They reduce the pressure of performances, make practice and performance not very different, by getting students in front of viewers as often as possible, so that it is a natural part of their playing life. They perform for audiences (often other students) as often as every week or two. When I watched practices, I was struck by how natural the students were with strange foreigners popping into their room. The Nucleo Director of La Rinconada says it is no big deal, it happens all the time; he delights in it because he says it shows the students lots of people are interested in what they do.

A very significant feature is that the students frequently watch other (especially more experienced) students perform. So they see their colleagues creating excellently, in essence they see "themselves" onstage. Little students see orchestras of musicians three years older, and six years older, and the top city and national youth orchestras—they see their teachers performing in the adult orchestras. They all see the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra—and there they see "themselves" performing as one of the best orchestras in the world. What could be more empowering and inspiring? They get the sounds of excellence in their ears, so it is easy for them to imagine themselves succeeding as advanced players—as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Another feature is that musicians are encouraged to keep their bodies alive and active in their playing. They move around much more than American and European orchestras, without losing technique. Perhaps this priority begins with the two year olds they start with, emphasizing body expressiveness to music. You can feel the extra vitality and expression that comes with this body involvement.

Yes, there is some competition within El Sistema—students audition for places in the more adept orchestras. But there is much less sense of pressure and failure around the results. They celebrate those who move up, and continue to have fun all the time in the orchestra they get to stay with.

Focus

The first and abidingly primary focus accounts for much of El Sistema's success in my view—building self-esteem, creating a daily haven of safety, joy, fun, and sense of value in each youngster. Dudamel told an audience in Los Angeles of two crucial features: "We start by making sure each child feels like an asset, because they don't come in feeling that; and we make sure that we never forget fun." You can feel it in the nucleo—all the children are proud, punctual, disciplined, determined and having the time of their lives.

The teachers really do attend to individuals—if they notice child has missed a second day at the nucleo without prior notice, they usually go to the home (which may be little more than corrugated iron and spare wood shanty) to see what the problem is. They keep the theme of building self-esteem prominent

through all its levels. For example, just about every student who gets into a youth or city orchestra receives a stipend; this not only honors their accomplishments in a way that really matters, but places real value on the music making for the family, so they don't need to pull the child out of El Sistema to work. The more I have thought about it, the more I grasp the subtle difference in the way their teachers view their students. They see the social and the musical mission, the development of the individual and the development of the musician as completely suffused—they don't develop character through music, they see the individual person and the musician at the same time, deal with both, love both. This is not to say American teachers don't love their students, or don't develop their characters, but El Sistema teachers look at their learners through a slightly different lens.

They use what I call a proleptic curriculum, borrowing a term from literary criticism that describes an image that recurs throughout a written work and each time it reappears, it accrues deeper meaning. Across El Sistema, the Gypsy Overture (*Obertura Gitana* by Merle John Isaac) is the first work students master. When students move from chorus and recorder and percussion into orchestras, the musical curriculum starts with simple arrangements of big pieces with big sound—because it is so satisfying and thrilling—1812 Overture, The Great Gate of Kiev. Tchaikovsky's March Slav is the first piece they play in non-reduced arrangement. There is an established sequence of pieces across El Sistema, but there is significant variation locally. However, they reintroduce those big sound, heart-pounding masterworks—1812 Overture, The Great Gate of Kiev...then Tchaikovsky, Beethoven—repeatedly across a young musician's career. It is no wonder the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra plays Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as well or better than any orchestra in the world. They have grown up inside it; it holds who they are, the best of them. As Dudamel told me in Los Angeles, "We have lived our whole lives inside these pieces. When we play Beethoven's Fifth, it is the most important thing happening in the world." And the audience feels it. In Caracas, I heard the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra rehearse and then perform the single best Tchaikovsky 4 I have ever heard. I was incredulous that they could know so much and feel so deeply at their young ages, but they invest all of themselves into it, and it reads. Also, the orchestras are big, to include more children. It is not unusual to see 150 or 200 members of one of their youth orchestras. It is all the more amazing that they play with such precision, given the sheer number of players.

A significant change in the last decade has been the inclusion of Venezuelan folk music and the music of Latin American composers. (They are very proud of being champions of Latin American composers.) So folk and Latin music is braided with classical in a fluid mix that appreciates them all equally. I was very aware that the Latin music developed a far more complex rhythmic sensibility than we see in American youth orchestras—my colleague Jamie Bernstein spotted a chorus taking the standard Dominican version of the merengue, which is in 4/4, and slipping into the Venezuelan version which is in 5/8—and the kids handled that with ease. Jamie's jaw dropped, "How do they *do* it?" You get that kind of rhythmic sophistication when musical genres are integrated. The leaders of El Sistema claim an unanticipated benefit of the expansion of the musical repertoire in the past decade—a dramatic growth of

interest in jazz in Venezuela, new clubs and performance venues popping up, with El Sistema musicians leading the way.

By ages of eleven and twelve, the youth children's orchestras take on Beethoven, working on the 1st, 5th and 7th symphonies, in that order. They work in sections at great length, with a teacher and lots of peer-coaching and mentoring. They may spend as much as three days on 12 bars of music, culminating in the whole orchestra coming together to work on those 12 bars. Almost all students join in annual retreats around holidays and vacations, for one to three weeks. While on retreat everyone works on pieces in a variety of ways for ten hours a day; no wonder they jokingly call it boot camp.

One tiny incident struck me as telling. I attended an all-Penderecki concert, conducted by Penderecki himself, by the Simon Bolivar Senior Orchestra (professionals with the original Simon Bolivar Orchestra, now called A, who keep performing because they are so good and in demand, as the next age cohort became the Simon Bolivar B, and so forth—down to E currently). You can imagine what a 2400 seat concert hall in the U.S. would look like on a weeknight for that concert. Well, the hall was nearly packed, almost half with El Sistema students, some as young as seven. The audience was overtly enthusiastic and clearly sophisticated. The image I will remember was the two 13-year-old violinists sitting in front of me. Clearly they were a romantic item. During the performance, every time there was a tricky or flashy violin section, they spontaneously grabbed one another's hands and pitched forward in their seats in breathless excitement. The response you might see in American kids at an action-thriller movie. This demonstrated authentically to me how deeply El Sistema informs the lives and hearts of the young musicians.

I also heard one of Caracas' two all-city orchestras, comprised of excellent, but perhaps not the very top players, around 15 years old. They played the most inspired version of Scheherazad I have ever heard. I said, "That warhorse was never so fresh and ready to run." You could feel them playing beyond what they thought they could do, breathless in excitement, but never out of control. I also heard an orchestra of 10-15 year olds play Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* Galop, the "can-can" music, and it was technically excellent and just exhilarating. They were clearly having the time of their lives, and I found out later this was the local nucleo orchestra that had just lost a number of its best players to one of the city orchestras.

New Center

For many years the administration of FESTNIJOV scrambled creatively to find spaces for their nucleos; now they are constantly approached to start new centers throughout the country. Next month they are opening their extraordinary new center, The National Center for Social Action Through Music. It is a huge downtown Caracas complex with four major concert halls, soundproofed so five orchestras can be rehearsing at the same time; it has dozens of other performance spaces, dozens of practice rooms and classrooms—space enough for 4,000 students. And at Abreu's demand, no (well, few) administrative offices—all music. Major orchestras from around the world are seeking bookings in the new central hall, which is purported to have the best acoustics on the continent; but rental requires that they do education work with El Sistema students. The building is wired for Internet 2, and will make their entire enormous video

archive of performances and classes available to the world digitally. One characteristic feature in the new hall is that it is situated on one side of the largest public park in downtown Caracas. The park is now too dangerous for citizens to use. So the building is creating a large outdoor stage that opens into the park, and they are working with the police to make it safe for the public to attend free concerts there—giving the park back to the public, through music.

Parents

Work with parents. Some kids who have no family board at the school. When they begin at age two or three, teachers go into the family home to assess the situation because children that young require a lot of parental/adult care, and they want to be sure the family can sustain it before the kid begins. Around age four kids are ready for group activities, and by age seven they are pretty much working in their first orchestra. They instruct parents on how to support the student well in their practicing; parents, and whole families, often sit and listen to the child practice at home, giving feedback and encouragement. I wasn't able to ascertain if regular involvement of families is the norm, or the exception as in the U.S., but understand that families are included in a variety of ways, and follow the student's learning quite closely and proudly.

Part 2: Additional factors that make it work.

Relentless, honed focus, on key goals: building self-esteem, and a sense of each child's value. I could feel the power of 33 years of unrelenting improvement—the focus has remained clear and unwavering, and they have refined, polished, refreshed, and deepened their practices to achieve those ends. You can feel the system's collective intelligence and educational elegance.

They reach for excellence, with astonishingly high standards and expectations for hard work over extended periods of time, but they support the reach not with pressure but with ongoing satisfaction and consistent images of their peers and colleagues succeeding at those high levels. They teach kids not to be afraid of things that are hard. They work early and uncompromisingly toward a sense of real achievement, continually upping the challenges and stakes. And then they see their older peers achieving at the highest levels.

Building community. From the first day, they make a safe, joyful place of equals (they wear uniforms, or at least the same shirts) who take care of each other. El Sistema marinates their students in love, high aspirations and expectations, belief in themselves and the group, and stick-to-it-iveness of the highest order. El Sistema grows from loving children first and loving music second. Love and high achievement coexist, both pour out of the teachers and the teaching environment, and there is no sense that love is conditional based on achievement.

Learning theory, educational psychology, and now even neuro-physiology confirm that people only learn through the positive path, through reward, love, encouragement, success and joy. Yes, we can train and guide people through fear and control, but real learning only springs from personal motivation and the rewards that ensue from self-perceived success. El Sistema is remarkable devoid of fear. Students never appeared nervous or stressed (or even

bored) to me. They all, and I mean *all*, appeared relaxed, poised, as if they were in their element and having fun. Yes they ran and played like kids when finished for the day, but the energy was not that of escape or release, as much as more easy fun. Students feel deep support, and *are* supported to succeed in every possible way. As Dudamel said, “We make sure each child feels like an asset.” With that commitment to the positive, no wonder they learn so fast.

On final reflection, I recall the words of the great 20th century physicist David Bohm, who said that anytime we encounter seeming polarities in opposition, we should look for the larger truth that contains them both. El Sistema has accomplished this impossible dream of including seeming opposites that we struggle between in the U.S.. Their foundation in those larger truths is a way of understanding why the work goes so far and deep. In the face of the seeming opposition of creating arts learning for artistic vs. social purposes, El Sistema is about love of children, and of course, love requires both kinds of success suffused—the either/or debate in the U.S., which has such a long history, makes no sense there.

In the face of seeming opposites of “classical” music as opposed to pop or folk music, El Sistema is clearly about the joy of making music, and listening to all kinds of great music. Music making of many kinds of music is explored and revered without losing the depth demanded of classical capacity or the fun of Latin rhythms in every day. No wonder they play the complex rhythms of Bernstein’s Mambo with such exhilaration—they live in musical pantheism and fusion. Yet they pour themselves into what is fundamentally a classical music path. What is profoundly important to classical music is that the young musicians discover that the great masterworks are great music they love—the process brings youngsters into the discovery of the relevance, power and profound vitality of classical music to their 21st century lives. This is the “holy grail” for classical music—to have those who are seemingly the least demographically likely to own the value of the orchestral tradition become the most passionate proponents and practitioners of it.

Facing the challenge that many “national” programs in the U.S. have faced, or “going to scale” as so many local programs have sought to do in wider expansion, El Sistema has found the balance between a national structure and local customization, and the dynamic balance seems to be the national structure and local experimentation. When a local experiment produces good results, it is shared and possibly adopted everywhere. It is a constantly evolving relationship, never codified or rigid, but always growing with its collective eyes on the same prize.

Facing the perennial tension between longterm goals to create orchestras that are the best in the world, and the short term goals of the hundreds of steps along the way for the thousands of individuals involved, they have found that joy, fun and collective hard work as the every hour realities produce the short *and* longterm goals. This may be another way of celebrating the way they have found to bring a program of this size live in serious play.

Rodrigo Guerrero, the director of FESNOJIV’s Office of International Relations best describes the miracle of social service vs. musical goals. He says that the students are so excited by and dedicated to the musical fun and creation, they don’t realize until they leave El Sistema that it is really a social development

program more than a musical one. The music is a means to change lives. And the means is so fully engaging, that the participants are don't even notice how it is changing the trajectory of their lives.

Let me add one final note about why this arts learning marvel grows so well. The prize that everyone involved keeps their eyes focused upon is one that is profoundly human and spiritually resonant. I found the entire endeavor to be spiritually infused, in an unarticulated, unmistakable, undoctinaire way. It is more than a sense of mission; it is a mission that matters widely, and achieves its ambitious goals with beauty, love and stunningly effective teaching and learning. As Dr Abreu states, "Music education transforms and dignifies the individual," and "Material poverty can be completely overcome by spiritual richness." Abreu believes that music and music education is one way to break the "cycle of poverty" that economists say Venezuela and Latin America are condemned to be trapped within. It is as much a movement to change the future of the nation (and now possibly other countries, as Scotland has begun their program, and other Latin American nations move into pilot phases, and the U.S. begin to join) as it is a program to change young lives. That is why many of their leaders grimace slightly when they think of tripling the size of the program in ten years, knowing how difficult that goal is, but they want to go for it because the chance for greater impact is irresistible to them. This is God's work—whatever that means to you.

Part 3: Adapting El Sistema to American culture

Reflecting on what I saw in Venezuela, I distilled the following challenges for myself and for those who are engaged in a process of planting El Sistema seeds on American soil. The following points intentionally do not suggest easy solutions, but are offered as deep challenges: *If we sought to create American Sistemas that held as rigorously to the Venezuelan model as possible, what would we need to consider?* Please note that these daunting goals are not intended to provide a roadmap as much as a refreshing icewater bath to our thinking. We gravitate toward the practical in U.S. arts learning; this list hopes to nudge us out of the practical long enough to invite new ways of thinking. These are not suggestions but provocations.

Top priority on what the young people need and want. What can we do to have the center where children come for the music program be the most enjoyable, encouraging, successful, meaningful, community-focused place in their lives. So they would love to come six days a week if we could organize it. What would it look like if our programs focused on the value of each kid's contribution and person-ness first, and on music second. What would it look like if every person involved held a laser-like personal commitment and focus to exactly that goal of individual empowerment first and foremost, and never ever forgot that fun is the most important feel for music.

Multiple years. Whatever ways we may start a program, whatever ages students begin as our programs begin, invest in the highest quality experience and fullest

expenditure of energy on the youngest new beginners, to allow for a multi-year arc of development. This doesn't mean giving up on those already past beginner's stage, but it does mean to invest in envisioning and building a many-year developmental sequence. Recruit a cadre of the youngest students possible, and have parental / family support built in as part of the process.

Logistics. It is free. It is after-school. It is local, ideally within walking distance for students. It is four hours a day six days a week. How might we make it that appealing for students, and how might we convince parents that such a commitment of discretionary time is good for their children, in a society that values grazing and broad experimentation.

Early and consistent musical challenge and success. Prioritize success and satisfaction, and escalate the challenges quickly. Probably begin with singing, work into singing with simple instruments, and then into orchestral instruments. Have children listen to, and interact with, older more experienced young musicians. Have students see their teachers perform too, regularly. Make sure the music is interesting and relevant to their lives; and take the time for students to discover the relevance of Beethoven.

Minimize musical notation hurdle. Use pedagogy that eases the step of reading standard musical notation, so the flow of success and satisfaction is not impinged. Is there a way to make the process of learning a musical language a fun advance, an acceleration of the success and satisfaction? When and how to best introduce it?

Three level teaching. Have the one-on-one teacher also be involved in sectional and orchestral rehearsals to speed the skill-building, to minimize the repetition of mistakes and provide more support.

Lots of section work. Dedicate a lot of learning to section time in orchestra work—e.g. give the violas a lot of time together working on their part in a new work the orchestra is taking on, before all the sections come together. What if the section took responsibility for the quality of its work, and peer coaching and tutoring were a big part of the learning.

Mix musical genres. Certainly include great classical compositions because they are so powerful—get students involved with them early (through reduced arrangements), often, and let them grow up with and grow into a few major works. But also include other great music with meaning to the community.

Reduce performance pressure. Narrow the gap between practice and performance, by bringing in observers more often, perhaps actively involving them. Have more frequent performances, even to other student groups, rather than holding off for one or several “big events” that increase anxiety and seem apart from the learning process.

Involve families. What if families were actively included and nurtured as assets to this process? What if there were ongoing communication with families about

how the students are doing, and what the focus of practice could be. How could you make it joyful for families to be involved, so they will want to stay involved for many years?

Do not rely on arts funding. What if the focus on advocacy were on social service funds and other public and private ways we support youth and families? What if a rule of advocacy were (like Abreu's practice) getting the potential funders to physically see the work before making the pitch?

Keep aspiring. El Sistema is currently making connections with dance and theater educators to include them in the expansion of El Sistema. The boldness of this work is that they plan together to make a major place for the arts in the school day, a major place for the arts in the national curriculum. They are building partnerships with youth sports networks in Venezuela. And they are building a 23 nation network to support youth music education throughout Latin America. And we must remember, it took 33 years of relentless focus and humble improvement to get to this point. May we all live so long to see such a banquet of learning for young people everywhere.